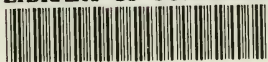


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GEORGE WASHINGTON

AS COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF



JAMES HOSMER PENNIMAN, LITT.D.

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1917

GEORGE WASHINGTON

AS COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF

To no other human cause is the success of the Americans struggling with the Mother Country in the War of the Revolution due so largely as to the tenacity of purpose of the extraordinary man who led their forces, added to the remarkable fact that he who assumed command under the Old Elm at Cambridge in 1775, remained Commander-in-Chief throughout the long war, and in 1781 forced Cornwallis to surrender at Yorktown.

Though Washington exposed himself with dash-ing courage, there is no record of his having been wounded. Though seriously ill a number of times before and after the war, he was always in full possession of his faculties during the Revolution. When we recall that the disastrous surprise at Brooklyn has been attributed to the sickness of General Greene, we are able to form an idea of what a calamity it would have been if through wounds or disease the watchful eye of the Commander-in-Chief had grown dim and that vigorous mind had relaxed its anxious thought.

The occupation of cities by the British was always of minor importance; the independence of America depended on her ability to keep an army in the field. Through Washington's efforts for eight years, an army was always ready and he was always at his post. During the war he left the army on few occasions, and then only when public business required his presence elsewhere. Washington was always the principal character on the stage of the

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Revolutionary War, the pivot around which everything else revolved. He had to contend with untold difficulties, with poverty, with cold, with hunger, with shiftlessness, with envy, with treachery, with hostile criticism, with jealousy, and with stupidity. Early in the war he wrote: "I know the unhappy predicament I stand in; I know that much is expected of me; I know that without men, without arms, without ammunition, without anything fit for the accommodation of a soldier, little is to be done; and, what is mortifying, I know that I cannot stand justified to the world without exposing my own weakness, and injuring the cause, which I am determined not to do. . . . My own situation is so irksome to me at times, that, if I did not consult the public good more than my own tranquillity, I should, long ere this, have put everything on the cast of a die."

His success was due to constant striving against adverse circumstances; he had remarkable forethought, but he anticipated difficulties only to overcome them. Misfortunes and accidents retarded but did not arrest his progress. He was always prepared for reverses, and had a way of retreat ready. When his army was defeated it was not routed, and was able to attack again as soon as an opportunity presented itself. Never unduly elated by success, he was never nobler than in disaster, and at no time more dangerous than when he seemed defeated; for no man was more ready than he to profit by the mistakes of his opponent, and no man was swifter to retrieve his own errors. As was remarked of Napoleon, "To say that he committed faults is only to say that he made war," but Washington's military misfortunes were usually of such a character as to add to his renown. His bringing a beaten army of

raw troops to fight bravely a few days after defeat, as he did at Germantown, aroused the admiration of the military experts of Europe; and no commander ever gave a grander exhibition of personal power than did Washington when he rallied the fleeing forces of Charles Lee and sent them back to the fight at Monmouth. No matter how few in numbers, an army commanded by Washington was always formidable, for he knew how to adapt his undertakings to the means at his disposal. He took advantage of every opportunity, and when an opportunity did not present itself, he created one. His force was not only usually weaker numerically than that of the enemy, but also inferior in discipline and military training; but so great was his personal influence, and such his skill in seizing on natural advantages of position, in reinforcing them by all the known devices of military art and by others hitherto unknown which he originated, that he outmaneuvered the British generals and often forced them to keep on the defensive or to withdraw. His success was largely due to his wonderful skill in putting his force exactly where it would do most good. His experience as a surveyor gave him a knowledge of topography and an ability to select the strongest position, that was superior to that of any other man in either army.

He did not trust to others the important work of reconnoitering, if it was possible to do it himself. Money spent on reconnoitering excursions forms one of the most frequent items in his accounts; and roads, rivers, fords, mountain passes, and elevated positions were always studied by him with the utmost care. That communication between the Northern and Southern States, which was essential to the success of the American cause, was always kept open

throughout the war, was due to his study of the country around the Hudson, and to his occupation of West Point and the Highland passes which controlled that river. More than any battles that he fought, his selection of positions like West Point, Morristown and Valley Forge, kept the British in constant danger; for in these places he could not be attacked to advantage; he could easily retreat if necessary; such supplies as the country afforded were within his reach; he could harass British foraging parties and prevent intercourse with the surrounding country; and if the enemy moved in force, he was ready to hang on his flanks and cut his communications. He kept informed of the intentions of the British, for his spies were continually coming and going. Washington's perception of the enemy's plans and his ingenuity in using the means at his disposal for overthrowing them were the result of the power which he constantly exercised of putting himself in the place of the opposing general, and of divining his plans by imagining what he himself would do in similar circumstances; so that he knew what General Howe ought to do better than Howe himself, and was at times puzzled because Howe blindly refused to do what was obviously to his great advantage; as, for example, when Howe went to Philadelphia instead of up the Hudson to the relief of Burgoyne. This was the greatest mistake that the British made during the war.

Most of the campaigns of the Revolution were planned by Washington, even those in which he did not take part. His papers describe many projects which, though carefully devised, came to nothing through the incompetence of subordinates, lack of means to provide the ordinary requisites of military operations, or through other circumstances which

could not be anticipated or prevented. His actions were based upon a broad foundation of common sense, but, as Dr. Weir Mitchell said, "If common sense explains his life, it was common sense lifted to the level of genius." Edward Everett thought that the most striking trait of Washington's character was judicial moderation. He did not make up his mind hastily. As soon as he awoke in the morning, he mapped out the business of the day; and he frequently retired to some quiet place for periods of prayer and meditation. He gave due weight to the opinions of others, but had the force of character to act on his own responsibility, and when he had done his utmost, he was content to abide by the decision of Providence. Avoiding side issues, his mind went straight to the point. As soon as he was sure of his opponent's intentions, his energies were concentrated on the vital spot to defeat them. When his plan was formed, he was swift to carry it out. One of his principles was, when you cannot win, make it as hard for the enemy as you can. He fought every inch of the way where it was possible, but no one could withdraw quicker than he when circumstances demanded. Nothing but his promptness in this respect saved the army at Brooklyn and at Trenton. On each of these occasions the British retired to rest with the expectation of annihilating the Americans in the morning, but during the night Washington had vanished with his army. Though the British employed many devices to draw him into false movements, he refused to be entrapped by them; and on the other hand, he was ever ready to take advantage of mistakes on their part. Too wary to allow himself to be surprised, he understood the power of surprise to help a weaker force, and made use of it at Trenton, Germantown and Stony Point. No one appreciated

better than Washington the axiom that in military operations time is everything, for time was his most powerful ally. While time was passing, the British were spending vast sums on their army and fleet; public opinion in opposition to the will of George III was gaining strength in England; the French were being won over; raw recruits were being disciplined into an army; and the thirteen colonies were being welded into a nation. From the beginning of the war, well-trained armies of professional soldiers were contending with the American people; and though the Americans were brave, and accustomed to the use of arms from youth, they learned by sad experience at Brooklyn and New York that bodies of men do not make an army unless they are properly disciplined. No one realized this more fully than Washington, and he was constantly writing monitions like these: "Discipline is the soul of an army—it makes small numbers formidable—procures success to the weak, and esteem to all." "Strict order is the life of military discipline." "To make men well acquainted with the duties of a soldier requires time; to bring them under proper discipline and subordination not only requires time, but is a work of great difficulty; and in this army, where there is so little distinction between officers and soldiers, requires an uncommon degree of attention. To expect, then, the same service from raw and undisciplined recruits as from veteran soldiers, is to expect what never did, and perhaps never will happen."

To Colonel William Woodford, he wrote, November 10, 1775, "Be strict in your discipline; that is, require nothing unreasonable of your officers and men, but see that whatever is required be punctually complied with. Reward and punish every man according to his merit, without partiality or preju-

dice; hear his complaints; if well founded, redress them; if otherwise, discourage them, in order to prevent frivolous ones. Discourage vice in every shape, and impress upon the mind of every man, from the first to the lowest, the importance of the cause, and what it is they are contending for. Forever keep in view the necessity of guarding against surprises. In all your marches, at times, at least, even when there is no possible danger, move with front, rear and flank guards, that they may be familiarized to the use; and be regular in your encampments, appointing necessary guards for the security of your camp. In short, whether you expect an enemy or not, this should be practiced; otherwise your attempts will be confused and awkward when necessary. Be plain and precise in your orders, and keep copies of them to refer to, that no mistakes may happen. Be easy and condescending in your deportment to your officers, but not too familiar, lest you subject yourself to a want of that respect, which is necessary to support a proper command."

Under Washington, the character of the army was constantly improving. He patiently reconciled the prejudices and jealousies of the men of the various colonies, and was always trying to organize an American army. When in camp, all general and field officers dined with him every day at three; so the General kept in touch with his men, and they became comrades. He began this custom as soon as he took command at Cambridge. Wherever it was possible, he personally saw the officers whom he entrusted with important work. His success was largely due to his shrewdness in dealing with men and to his ability to select the right man for the place. He knew mankind from lifelong and active experience, in the House of Burgesses of Virginia, in Congress, in the

Army, on the farm, and in the forest! He understood the motives and dispositions of such various races as Americans, British, French, Indians and negroes. The range of his experience extended over the whole gamut of human nature, from the selfishness of an Arnold or a Gates to the lofty patriotism of a Lafayette or a Greene, whose highest ambition was to act at all times as Washington would have done.

Experience had taught him not to expect too much, and he wrote Philip Schuyler: "We must bear up—and make the best of mankind as they are, since we cannot have them as we wish;" a sentiment which reminds us of the epigrams of Montaigne. The confidence which existed between Washington and men like Greene, Knox and Lafayette, was a charming feature of the war. It is said that even thirty years after, Washington's officers could not speak of his farewell without tears. The devotion of his friends and neighbors was conspicuous throughout his career. He had the confidence of men of influence, and he utilized their attachment to him for the good of his country as no other man in America could have done. Knox wrote him: "I know that the people of America look up to you as their Father, and into your hands they trust their all, confident of every exertion on your part for their security and happiness; and I do not believe there is any man on earth for whose welfare there are more solicitations at the Court of Heaven than for yours."

Washington received cruel wounds from some who pretended to be his friends, who found it the easier to attack him because he could not reply to their charges of inefficiency without informing the enemy of his lack of powder and of every other military necessity. He had a deep aversion to controversies, and especially tried to avoid feuds that might

injure the American cause. He never took up a quarrel unless it was forced upon him; but when it was necessary, he acted with decision, and showed people with such different kinds of presumption as Lord Howe, Gates and Conway that it was not safe to take liberties with him. In spite of experiences with traitors like Charles Lee and Arnold, he never lost faith in humanity, and he loved to believe that other men were as noble-natured as himself. His reason controlled his passions, so that even his enemies respected him. His acts and words were those of a gentleman, and the grand manner which he learned in youth from Lord Fairfax he always retained. When necessary he could be severe, but his own inclination was always toward mercy. He never permitted his personal feelings to stand in the way of his duty, and his example was the most powerful influence.

Washington was a careful observer and listener. He was everywhere, his eye saw everything, and there was a sternness in that eye that no man whose work was not well done would willingly face. Though he saw all, he said little, but, when circumstances warranted it, he could speak such burning words that Henry Lee said he was like the torrent of Niagara. Yet he did not bear malice, and he wrote that he never said anything of a man that he would not say to him. No greater evidence of his wonderful personality could be given than the way in which he immediately won the respect, admiration and affection of accomplished Frenchmen, when the whirligig of time had made those against whom he contended in his youth the allies of his later years. Rochambeau said that he never knew what true glory was, nor a truly great man, till he met Washington.

It is hardly possible to give a better picture of Washington during the Revolution than those few words of Mr. Owen Wister, which describe him as "*hurrying somewhere on a horse with ragged soldiers behind him.*" One might preach a sermon on Washington with these words as a text, for every one is big with meaning. *Hurrying* indicates strength, energy and zeal. *Somewhere*, not *anywhere*, to a place carefully chosen where he could do the utmost for his country. *On a horse*—Jefferson said he was the best horseman of his age, and history and art alike record no nobler figure than Washington on horseback. *Ragged*—his men were ragged because they were giving up all to fight for the country which did not pay them even the pittance it had agreed to. The Americans were the most hard-working, honest and thrifty people on earth, and were never ragged except when serving in the Continental Army. *Behind him*—they were backing him up to the extent of their ability, because he had won their hearts. For, however he might be criticized by those who planned campaigns by the warm fireside, he had the confidence of the freezing, starving heroes around him. It was serious business to serve under Washington. He was a leader who could make men do things. As soon as recruits saw him, they felt that here was a man on whom they could rely to the last extremity, and it was this that sustained his men at Brooklyn and Trenton. No one but him could have kept the army together during those weary months at Valley Forge and Morristown. As Archibald Forbes said of Skobelev: "He radiated from him the mysterious irresistible magnetism that inspired men to follow him, to use the rough soldier-phrase, 'through hell and out at the farther side.'" Like Napoleon, he kept in touch with his men, and

explained the situation to them and appealed to their patriotism when great efforts were needed. Patriotism may generally be said to diminish in proportion to the distance from home, perhaps even as the square of the distance; but the men who followed Washington thought that it was their duty to obey wherever they were, in hunger and cold and rags, and to die obeying. His courage was the admiration of his men: the only thing they had against him was the fearless way in which he exposed himself; but, though he risked his own life, he was careful not to endanger theirs unless it was necessary, and his anguish at the useless exposure of his troops at Brooklyn is recorded by eye-witnesses.

In times of danger his mind worked more quickly, and a fellow Virginian described him as being as cool in action as a bishop at his prayers. Jefferson said that he was "incapable of fear, meeting personal dangers with the calmest unconcern." Washington not only had courage under fire, but he had what is far more unusual and what was much more valuable to the cause for which he was contending—he had the fortitude to endure suffering, suspicion, want, and physical and mental weariness, without losing faith in the cause and in mankind. The one thing that made him lose his self-control was cowardice on the part of his men; and on the other hand, his admiration of bravery was such that, although usually a remarkable judge of character, he overlooked Benedict Arnold's failings, and appointed him to the most responsible position at his disposal. This was perhaps the greatest mistake that Washington made during the war, and an explanation of it may be found in the possibility that, as sometimes happens, Arnold's severe wounds had caused a deterioration in his moral fibre. It is interesting to

note that the difference between the enduring fortitude of a Washington and the rash gallantry of a Benedict Arnold was observed centuries ago; for Plato says that a mind prepared to meet danger, if impelled by its own eagerness rather than by the public good, deserves more the name of audacity than of courage. Though as devoted to the occupations of peace as any man in America, when aroused Washington had a flaming ardor of combativity which illuminated the darkest circumstances; so that it was said that "Hope shone in him like a pillar of fire, when it had gone out in all other men." No one understood better than he the axiom that it is not the actual loss of men in battle which is disastrous so much as the resulting discouragement which deprives the remaining forces of their power to continue the struggle. It was always necessary for him to act in such a manner as to keep up the spirits of the army and of the nation. This was his most important work. Public opinion at times forced him to attempt what was not in accordance with his own views or with military policy. He fought the Battle of the Brandywine, for instance, in the vain attempt to keep the superior force of Lord Howe from the occupation of Philadelphia, which proved to be of little use to them. The short periods of enlistment caused it to be said that he was obliged to carry on war, "not according to military opportunities, but according to the calendar." And he wrote, "it is as easy to stop a torrent as the soldiers when their time is up."

The might of Washington's sword depended, to a much greater extent than is generally realized, upon the power of his pen. Throughout the Revolution he was busy writing instructions for his men, letters to Congress, to Lord Howe, to Brother

Jonathan Trumbull, to people of influence everywhere. He was the most productive of American writers; the collection of his manuscripts in the Library of Congress is known to be the largest of any one man in the world. In the calendar of his letters to the Continental Congress from 1775 to 1783 are about two thousand letters, or nearly one a day, and he wrote about seven thousand other military letters in the same period. He also wrote at this time numerous letters to his wife, only one of which has been preserved, and a very long weekly letter to Lund Washington about the management of affairs at Mount Vernon. In addition to these, he wrote many other letters of business, ceremony or friendship during the war. The letters written by his secretaries were revised by him, and elaborate drafts of official letters, entirely in the handwriting of Washington, were often prepared in moments snatched from needed repose, and sometimes in the midst of actual danger. Yet his high-toned manner never forsook him, and he always wrote like a gentleman. No military man and few men of letters have been able to use the English language more skillfully, and his style was singularly concise, accurate and direct. Guizot said that Washington was endowed to an extraordinary degree with the power of influencing men by "honorable sentiments and by truth"; but though much was due to his persuasive charm, his words also commanded respect, because it was felt that, to apply to him an expression of Alphonse Daudet, he could make powder talk as well as ink. The influence of Washington's letters in forming public opinion throughout the war was enormous, for such was the confidence in his reliability and integrity that when, for instance, Governor Jonathan Trumbull received a letter from General

Washington stating that supplies were needed, every nerve was strained to meet the demand.

Washington's tact, patience and wisdom were nowhere more conspicuous than in his letters to Congress; nominally its servant, he often inspired and directed it. No other man possessed its confidence to such a degree; so that, though Congress was always jealous of military dominion, when there was the greatest danger it did not hesitate to invest him with dictatorial power. He was especially busy during the winters in urging Congress and the governors of the States to take the necessary steps for raising and subsisting a suitable army, in caring for the little band of ragged patriots huddled around him, and in preparing for the summer campaign. These were tasks of the utmost difficulty, for the system of government of the colonies was disarranged by the outbreak of the war, and such authority as existed was mostly in the hands of Committees of Safety, with no legal powers, whose duties were vaguely defined. Yet so great was the intelligence and patriotism of the people, that there was little crime or disorder.

Washington's ability to select important points from masses of detail, to winnow the true from the false, and to size up a situation, was little short of marvellous. He always had the latest and fullest intelligence, and it is not easy to realize the difficulty of obtaining reliable information during the Revolution. Communication was slow, and dangerous; opportunities for observation were restricted; newspapers were issued irregularly, and had only a limited circulation. Washington took personal charge of the Secret Service, and had gold for this department when gold was a curiosity and there was nothing but paper money for all other purposes. General

Greene voiced the opinion of his chief when he wrote: "Spies are the eyes of an army, and without them, a general is always groping in the dark." Many of Washington's spies were known to him alone; they used invisible ink, and important papers were often concealed in the pommel of a saddle, or in buttons. The success at Trenton is attributable to two causes: to the accurate information which Washington's spies brought him of the numbers, disposition and condition of the Hessians; and to Washington's forethought in taking the unusual number of eighteen cannon with his force of only twenty-four hundred men. That stormy morning, muskets were mostly wet and useless, but cannon could be employed in any weather, and six guns pointed at two regiments of Hessians at less than three hundred yards, decided the contest before it began.

Washington constantly felt his lack of theoretical training in military affairs, and late in life he wrote: "A thorough examination of the subject will evince that the art of war is extensive and complicated; that it demands much previous study; and that the possession of it in its most important and perfect state is always of great moment to the security of a nation."

As a young man, he read a translation of Cæsar's Commentaries, and must have studied other military works; for, in 1754, William Fairfax wrote him these memorable words: "In the Duke of Marlborough's campaign you'll observe many wise retreats performed that were not called flights"—words which were, no doubt, in Washington's mind as he retired in that masterly way through New Jersey late in 1776. Marlborough learned the art of war from Turenne, Condé, and Vauban, the great masters of his time, under whom he served for five

years. With the single exception of General Braddock, who, it may be assumed, learned more from Washington than Washington did from him, he never served under any one who could give him any military instruction whatever. The principal advantage he derived from the campaign with Braddock was the opportunity for observation of the British regular, collectively and individually, observation which doubtless formed the basis of much of his subsequent success. He was always a thorough, hard-working student of subjects like Agriculture, Military Affairs, and Government, which it was his business to know; and he spared no trouble or expense to obtain the best books, and made careful abstracts of them, some of which may be seen among his manuscripts in the Library of Congress. In 1775 he recommended one of his officers to familiarize himself with Bland's Essay on the Art of War, Instructions for Officers, The Partisan, Young, and others. Among the military books in his library were Otway's Art of War, The Doctrine of Projectiles, Daveis's Cavalry, Simm's Military Course, A Work on Manœuvres, Stevenson's Military Instructions for Officers Detached in the Field, Count Saxe's Plan for New Modeling the French Army, A New System of Military Discipline, Prussian Evolutions in Actual Engagements, Code of Military Standing Resolutions, Claviac's Field Engineer, Müller on Fortification, Anderson's Essays on Field Artillery, A System of Camp Discipline, Vallancey on Fortification, Pickering's Militia, Steuben's Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States, *Traité de Cavalerie*, Webb's Treatise on the Appointments of the Army, De Jeney's The Partisan, or the Art of Making War in Detachment, The Military Guide, The Duties of Soldiers in General.

Few men have ever learned the trade of the soldier in a harder school of practical experience, and no man ever paid a higher price in work and discomfort for the honors that he gained. No better training could have been provided for the command of the Revolutionary Armies than Washington's apprenticeship in the Virginia forces from 1751 to 1758. He learned then how to deal with untrained soldiers, with disciplined British troops, with French, Indians, colonists, and with a Colonial Legislature; and he then acquired the habit of accomplishing results with feeble resources, which remained with him through life. In spite of his lack of military training on a large scale, Washington was far better equipped than the British generals for the conduct of the war in America; for he understood the country and the people as did no other man, with the possible exception of Franklin. He had in an unusual degree a combination of opposite qualities of the utmost value to a commander. Because of his broad common sense, severity was tempered by clemency, audacity by caution; and no other general has ever been able to take a more comprehensive view of the whole field of affairs and at the same time to devote such concentrated attention to details.

Much of the routine of the soldier's trade is similar to that of any other business, so that the careful work which he performed in the management of the large estates in Virginia was an excellent preparation for the task of providing food, clothes, powder, guns, transportation, money and men for his army; for he had to feed, move and pay it, while contending with the perfectly appointed forces of the richest nation in the world; and he did all these things under a fire of criticism at home that was far more difficult to endure than that of the enemies' guns. Nothing

with regard to his troops was too minute for his attention.

“While at the head of the army,” says Sparks, “the names and rank of the officers, the returns of the adjutants, commissaries, and quartermasters, were compressed by him into systematic tables, so contrived as to fix strongly in his mind the most essential parts, without being encumbered with details. When the army was to march, or perform any movements requiring combination and concert, a scheme was first delineated; and at the beginning of an active campaign, or in the preparation for a detached enterprise, the line of battle was projected and sketched on paper, each officer being assigned to his post, with the names of the regiment and strength of the forces he was to command.” Ever the best fitted for military command, Washington was always the last to seek it. He never overestimated himself, and was always ready to recognize his faults and correct them. He said, “I do not think vanity is a trait of my character.” He rarely talked of what he was going to do, and never boasted of what he had done. He was always more interested in the present and future than in the past. He cared for the success of the cause rather than for his own glory, and did not hesitate to send his best troops when they could be of use to other generals—a service which was not returned at times of his urgent necessity; for instance, Washington said that if, after the surrender of Burgoyne, Gates had promptly sent back Morgan’s riflemen and the other troops which he had despatched to his aid, the forts on the Delaware could have been held, Howe’s army in Philadelphia starved out, and the war shortened by several years. Washington sought nothing for himself, and declined all payment for his services during the struggle with Great Britain. It

is said that the only personal request he ever made of the Government was that he might be permitted to retain his original commission. It is now in the Headquarters at Morristown.

General Washington's military talents were the development of unusual natural qualities trained by a long series of Divinely guided experiences. The stripling who professed himself charmed by the whistling of bullets, in the process of time grew into the stern yet tender-hearted warrior who at Brooklyn was in agony at the loss of his men. At twenty-two, Washington wrote "my inclinations are strongly bent to arms." After the Revolution, at fifty-three, he called war "this plague to mankind," and said "my first wish is to see it banished from off the earth." Yet it was always his opinion that "to be prepared for war is the most effective means to promote peace." His last letter, written two days before his death, was to Alexander Hamilton, on the establishment of a military academy, which he described as an object of primary importance to this country.



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